

LIFE&TIMES **LIVING**

# On one track with the sarong

Hundreds ditched their pants in favour of the humble sarong to get on board a train recently, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

**L**OOK for a man of Middle Eastern origin, with relatives in all corners of the Earth, whose father invites people to stay at the drop of a hat and you may just come across Syed Zain Abdul Rahman Alhadad (or Zain HD, for short).

The 29-year-old co-founder of Random Alphabets, the events group that organised last month's Keretapi Sarong 2013, says: "Random Alphabets started out as a blog. It became a community blog and it's now a group that does events."

Keretapi Sarong, now in its second year, is inspired by the No Pants Subway movement in New York, which mobilised 1,200 New Yorkers to ditch their pants and wear anything else instead to ride on the train in 2009.

A cynic might wonder about the purpose of such events as Keretapi Sarong. Are they, in fact, nothing more than a group of people having fun? Zain pauses to collect his thoughts before explaining the rationale behind such events.

Zain confides that he likes bringing people together, not uniting



Zain likes to bring people together.

them. "I think the word 'unite' has been misappropriated. People have concerts to unite people or a group of people may come together. But it's just that group that's united. I want to do projects where people come together, regardless of what segment of society they're from, they get to be part of the event."

He illustrates this by describing a photo taken during the KL Chapter of the World Pillow Fight Day 2010. "The image was of a 30-year-old Hijabi single mother and a 20-year-old Chinese college student dressed in hot pants having a pillow fight. They were having fun. This would never have happened in normal situations. They would probably never have met or been in the same room."

The other was Tali Tenang. "It was January 2010 and the mood in KL was dark and sombre. The Court had announced its judgment on the use of the word Allah and places of worship were attacked. From idea to execution, it took us just six days. People turned up, in white T-shirts, Malaysian flags as well as a string as long as their arm. They tied those strings together and walked from Bangsar LRT to Bangsar Village and Bangsar Sports Complex."

Ultimately, Zain believes that Random Alphabets events work because "... they're often timely and everyone's there on a good vibe".

Zain's family originates from Hadramout in South Yemen. "Although many of us have migrated, we maintain ties with the Middle East. Which is why, I think, we've always had visitors staying with us. They can arrive at 11pm and my father will probably ask them to stay with us. Then it's 'Zain, do this; Zain, do that.' It was common for us to have 10 people staying at any one time in our house in Shah Alam," he shares.

A law graduate from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, with a post-graduate diploma in Syariah Law, he's interested in jurisprudence and says, "I feel that people are not exposed to various theories. So, they argue only about one theory." Nevertheless, having completed a short stint at a legal firm, he is certain he has no desire to practise law.

Instead, now living in Kuala Lumpur with his wife, Zain seems



All aboard the sarong train.

to have caught the travel bug. Over the years, he's funded his trips with money collected from jobs as varied as giving tuition to working in a carpet shop. With parents working in the airlines industry, cheap seats are aplenty for this intrepid traveller.

Zain's most fascinating tales come from his travels to South America. "I like going to places people don't normally go to. Places we know little about. The learning curve is steepest there. I first went to South America a few years ago. I joined a group called Couchsurfing. When you visit someone's house, you must share some-

thing about your culture."

He adds: "In Argentina, something interesting happened. We were on this delta, some few hours out of Buenos Aires.

There were 40 of us and we pitched our tents on the land belonging to this Jewish man. His house was half-built. I was wearing a 'I Love KL' T-shirt. Someone in the group came to me and said, 'KL. That's Kuala Lumpur, yes?' "Used to people not knowing where Southeast Asia is, Zain was surprised at how accurate this man was.

During a return trip to South America, he revisited his Jewish host. "This time, his house was complete. I also joined a group of Malaysians on a Trans Amazon Expedition. We drove from Argentina to Paraguay, Brazil and Venezuela. Five hundred kilometres in Malaysia can be completed in a day. There, it takes three days."

There were also some 400 bridges to cross. At one point, they couldn't cross a bridge because it was in the initial stages of being repaired. Zain, who knows a smattering of Spanish, was appointed to communicate with the foreman. He tried everything from sign language to drawing to convey their desperate need to cross the bridge.

"Then, I said 'Reals' which is Brazilian currency," says Zain. "From that moment on, he understood everything I said." Zain smiles, adding: "Clearly, money talks."

"...I want to do projects where people come together, regardless of what segment of society they're from."  
 Syed Zain Abdul Rahman Alhadad

## WRAP-AROUND STORIES

Participants of the 2013 Keretapi Sarong event share their stories.

### ALISHA SHAHARUDDIN, 28, COPYWRITER

I couldn't make it to Keretapi Sarong last year. I wanted to see how much of an impact a simple idea could have. People here are from all walks of life. It's nice to see something uniquely Malaysian and how others interpret it. The sarong I'm wearing today is from Myanmar. When I wear this, I get a sense of calm as I associate it with the time I stayed in Myanmar with my parents for three months. I hired a teacher to teach me to play the violin. He did so without speaking a word of English. Music transcended the need

for language and I always think of this when I wear this sarong.

### RFAN FAROOK, 25, ENGINEER

I'm from Sri Lanka and I recently joined a group called Couchsurfing. I like the event because it's something that's done in a positive spirit and I feel alive. It's better than sitting in a room and staring at the four walls. My sarong is from Sri Lanka.

### YURY IVANOC, 30, PHOTOGRAPHER AND IRINA ARBUZOVA, 30, WEB DESIGNER

We're from Russia. We're travelling in Asia and have been here for 10 days. We like the sarong because it looks traditional. It's a universal

size and it's not hot. The flowers are really colourful and we can see that this is something people wear at home.

### FERDINAND PEREIRA, 28, COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER

My sarong is from Chiang Mai, Thailand. I associate the sarong with memories of my childhood. I remember being carried in one when I was a child. The sarong transcends races. Everyone in my age group has a story about it. It's a very Asian thing. I feel liberated when I wear it. After all, when do you get the chance to come out in your sarong and go on a train to join like-minded people to have fun?



Yuri Ivanoc and Irina Arbuzeva